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The following report on the telephone ministry and suicide prevention service has been written by the Rev. Klaus Thomas, M.D., Ph.D. Dr. Thomas, formerly of the Inner Mission and then working as doctor and psychotherapist, founded the telephone ministry in Berlin some years ago.

TELEPHONE MINISTRY

An increasing number of cities in Europe is starting telephone ministries, mostly in connection with suicide prevention services. The first four cities to establish them were Helsingborg, London, Berlin and Vienna. They were followed by Frankfurt, Zürich, Birmingham, Rotterdam, St. Galle, Düsseldorf, Hamburg and others.

When a telephone ministry was installed in Seattle, USA, three years ago, its ten numbers were dialled so constantly in the first five hours that finally all fuses gave out and Seattle was without telephone services for several hours.

In New York about 20,000 people ring one of the four centres every day - in Los Angeles 10,000, in St. Francisco 3,500 - to ask for information, advice and help. In the European countries where this service exists, however, the number of daily telephone calls is less: the ministry in Berlin receives only 10 to 50 calls a day.

In 1953 a Baptist minister named West advertised in a London newspaper: "Before you commit suicide, ring me up!" and since then the telephone ministry has been accompanied by a suicide prevention service. The gravity of the appeals presents pastors with special responsibilities requiring extensive factual knowledge, psychological and otherwise, experience, human wisdom and kindness, not to mention strong nerves. Not only pastors, however, but members of all other academic professions, social workers, laymen and lay women may qualify for the service if they show the necessary inclination, aptitude and training.

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Very good results were obtained by installing a supplementary reception-phone on which a less experienced staff member followed the conversation and took notes so that an experienced pastor could concentrate wholly on giving advice and be sure to have the necessary documentation later on.

The telephone ministry thus offers excellent opportunities for practical training in pastoral work, a subject which is taught in Sweden, Greece and the United States but not in Germany.

Who are the people who ring up the telephone ministry and why do they call?

Without defining the distinctions too closely, we can distinguish between four main groups.

1. The first large group covers nearly half of the cases. We could call it a "contacting service" leading on to subsequent personal conversations offering greater possibilities for help through direct contact. Clear information and advice are rarely asked for in the first instance. The aim of a first telephone conversation - when the caller has explained his problem - is then to create an atmosphere of confidence and to arrange a personal visit. If the caller is sick, the pastor may have to visit his home.

Both the woman who despaired of her unfaithful husband and the 52-year old businessman who thought he could not outlive bankruptcy were asked for a personal interview.

Very often the callers themselves ask: "When may I come to see you?" In other cases it is the pastor who suggests a personal meeting.

The timid, the ones who find it difficult to make contacts and the inhibited will turn to the non-committal telephone rather than face a personal visit because they can hang up the receiver at any moment. There are also the people who do not go to church, who would not like to make their way to a parsonage but who will summon up enough courage to telephone for advice.

2. The second group is made up of people requiring "advisory care". The problems may concern the more usual difficulties of love affairs or married life, mothers unable to deal with their growing children, young people or adults who have come into conflict with the law through ignorance, carelessness or more serious causes, housing difficulties or other social problems. Once the problem has been explained these conversations often end with the question: "What shall I do?"

It is by no means only the desparate and those in need of advice and help who turn to the telephone as the last or at any rate the easiest way out. There are also the easy-going people who hope to save themselves a visit to the lawyer or to the doctor. They often have to be disillusioned, especially those who have the impertinence to ask the pastor to visit their suburban homes in the middle of night, or who try to cadge means of satisfying their passions. Our own limited resources prevent us from giving any financial aid to these people, and therefore constitute a salutary protection against exploitation.

3. A third group of persons may be described as being in need of "consolation". How much hidden sorrow is revealed by the telephone! It happens again and again that only an uncontrolled sobbing is heard on the other end of the

line until finally the first words tell of the cause of the person's distress. This is one of the few situations in which pastors have found it possible and suitable to throw in a few Christian words of consolation and to say, for instance, that they understand the sorrow and the solitude, but that our Heavenly Father knows about them as well and that one can trust Him; that here is a chance to have a heart-to-heart talk on the telephone; there is certainly a way out, etc.etc.

Generally this will start people talking: the sick who are in pain, the women who have been deceived, the bereaved whose solitary existence seems senseless to them, the victim of a swindler, the disappointed, the old and the blind, or others who are grateful to have found someone who will listen to them and will show them in terms of warm human sympathy that they are not abandoned. It requires a fine sense of tact to judge when biblical consolation is out of place or at least inwardly rejected, and when it is gratefully accepted as the real and only source of support.

The ever-recurring question of most of these people, implicitely or directly expressed, is: "Is there nobody who loves me?"

Telephone ministry as a brief form of individual care should be supplemented by social evenings, Bible study, prayers and intercession, etc. These may provide further stimulation and possibilities for new contacts.

The last and most important group of callers are those who are weary of life; they can often be saved from the final desperate step through "preventative ministry". Their number is tremendous. In Germany there are 50,000 attempts at suicide each year and 15,000 of them are successful! It has often been argued that really desperate people never stop to pick up the telephone! But this is true only of a relatively small proportion. And in their case their relatives, neighbours or friends often ring up in despair: "He is going to do away with himself", or "We have found a letter.." During the Hungarian revolt a 17-year old maid-servant rang up: "My employers are planning to commit suicide tonight; they say there will be another war!" Or a boy of sixteen may telephone about his sister only one year his senior: "She is expecting a baby and is going out to drown herself".

Quite often there are calls from people who have attempted suicide but have not succeeded and afterwards regretted their action; they have cut their veins but are still conscious, or the rope has given away and the heavily injured old man drags himself to the nearest telephone.

During the two years in which it has been operating, the telephone ministry in Berlin has cared for about 1,000 people who are weary of life or people in danger of committing suicide; 10% of them had actually attempted suicide. Their question, although it may be set in different words, invariably is: "Is there no other way out?"

Berlin has the highest suicide figure in the world. It is remarkable that the figure for West-Berlin has dropped from 6 per 10,000 inhabitants in 1946 to 3 per 10,000 in 1957, while the figure for East-Berlin (not published) is still 6 per 10,000 - this means that in East-Berlin every twelfth person commits suicide, while in West-Berlin one out of every 26 persons and in the German Federal Republic only one out of every 40 persons dies in that way.

The figure for attempted suicides is about twice as high as that for successful suicides.

Care for those weary of life clearly involves direct cooperation with a doctor, psychiatrist or mental hospital. It would be desirable to complete the ministry by a home for the weary.

On the whole, the telephone ministry therefore differs basically from an ordinary pastoral conversation in the following ways:

1) The people who ask for help through the telephone are not the same as those who come for a visit; they are more often outsiders, estranged from the church, or even completely anti-church.

Those who engage in telephone ministry must therefore be especially realistic, experienced and devoted and only desirous to help without any trace of a judging, moralistic attitude.

2) The problems brought to the attention of the telephone ministry are entirely different. Approximately half of them are questions concerning love affairs and married life; others concern problems of health, family questions, professional, financial and other difficulties. What help can be given to homosexuals or drunkards? The answer to these questions would lead too far, but a telephone ministry - in close co-operation with a psychotherapist - should know exactly what to say in such cases. These are not so much religious matters as general human problems, and yet the pastor has to see beyond them to the spiritual need, the heavy conscience, the open or secret guilt, and be ready, if the caller broaches the subject, to point the way to a change of heart and complete liberation.

3) Finally, the telephone ministry requires a completely <u>different approach</u> from that used in direct conversation. It is more important than ever to be able to listen! The pastor's voice should convey more than ever his natural acceptance of life and a completely relaxed attitude based on religious faith.

The need for a telephone ministry has become apparent not only in America, England and Sweden but also in Germany, where experience has shown how great is the need for an outstretched hand. Those who are ready to discard their lives are often more ready than others to start a new life.

It is all the more important that external worries should not hinder or jeopardize the task of telephone ministry. It is unworthy to expect our colleagues, who work on an honorary basis almost without exception, to spend their energy and time in struggling with increasing telephone charges and rents.

Yet more important than adequate financial support of the work is the need for training centres, special seminaries on pastoral work, where telephone ministry, supplemented by practical work, is taught as a special subject.

<u>Note</u>: One of the next issues of the Montly Letter will report about the telephone evangelism in Great Britain.